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Op Ed -- Rhetoric, Library Management, and Organizational Mergers: Why We Can't Talk Straight About Integrating Library and Computer Center Services

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Op Ed — Rhetoric, Library Management, and Organizational Mergers: Why We Can't Talk Straight about Integrating Library and Computer Center Services

by **Steve McKinzie** (Director of Library Services, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

Recently the **Council of Independent Colleges (CIC)** and the **Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR)** sponsored a conference for senior college and university administrators at **Kenyon College** (March 2006). Ostensibly, the conference explored "Integrating Library and Computer Services." The program featured an array of CIOs in charge of newly-minted IT/Library merged organizations, and it touted an accompanying assortment of academic deans and college presidents who had helped engineer such couplings.

I didn't attend the gathering, but the promotional email list postings and the personalities involved suggested the event was first rate — its program enlightening and its presenters distinguished. But there was a downside. The conference illustrated a disturbing truth about libraries, IT, and their respective managements. We don't do organizational change well. That is, we don't discuss it even-handedly. We don't deal with it objectively.

Instead, we lapse into promotionalism. We champion whatever is different, whatever is new or possibly whatever seems to be more technical. Such was the case at **Kenyon College**. Despite the event's quality and high-profile personalities, the conference (if the program agenda is to be believed) entertained scant dissent and gave small credence to counter arguments. Indeed, the whole conference operated under a single premise — a premise spelled out in the most uncompromising terms on the conference's Website: "Merged information service organizations create the best environment for fostering breakthrough scholarly activity." Not only that, the college presidents who spoke argued that merged service organizations enhanced institutional prestige, increased efficiency, and attracted potential students. The faculty who came claimed that their own research had been improved, and the librarians on the

program suggested that the merging service organizations had enhanced their professional lives.

In one sense the **Kenyon Conference** represented a capstone event, a mature manifestation of a growing movement, one that emerged more than a decade ago. In the mid-nineties, a handful of directors, CIOs or academic deans began to merge their information services organizations (code name for IT/Library mergers). They argued that the resulting mergers were both successful and necessary — better than anything going. Articles appeared. Library deans lectured at EDUCAUSE conferences, and finally well-funded and well-attended conferences emerged, such as the one at **Kenyon**, all claiming how nicely things had worked out for those who had implemented the new design.

Conversely, the promoters of such mergers labeled those who failed to adopt the new organizational structure or questioned it as behind the times, closed to rapid and fluid changes, and incapable of adjusting to new approaches. And why wouldn't that be the case? Such merged service organizations, its defenders clearly insisted, were more fluid, more dynamic, more responsive to user needs — not to mention more empowering for librarians — end of discussion.

The problem with such arguments and such conferences is that they are largely only half of the dialogue. Whereas it is certainly true that some mergers are extraordinarily successful, a good many are not. Indeed, mergers often occur at significant cost — both financial and personal. They sometimes fail altogether, as was the case at **Gettysburg College**. At some institutions anecdotal evidence even suggests that users may well have been better off had no service organization merger ever occurred.

In one sense, the hype associated with such mergers is understandable. You cannot blame librarians for seizing a publishing opportunity. You cannot keep people from talking about what they believe to be both successful and preferable. But the self-congratulatory rhetoric that often accompanies merger discussions invites little criticism. It entertains scant dissension and welcomes few counter voices. Most important for those of us who work in the trenches of real libraries — ref-

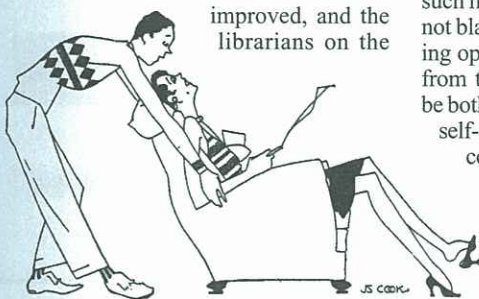
erence librarians and computer specialists who work directly with users — the merged-service organization publishing industry has little hard data to prove its contentions. It is as if the war victors have written the history books, or more to the point, it is as if a few radicals have engineered a revolution, labeled those who wonder about its success as counter revolutionaries, and explained away whatever the human and service cost.

Consider some of the facts about mergers, facts that simply go unreported in the literature or little discussed at professional conferences. A number of libraries have seriously considered merging their IT and Library organizations and then backed away from the decision. In Pennsylvania, **Elizabethtown College** spent more than a year studying the question after the retirement of their library director enabled them to consider the option. They decided that a merger was not the right choice for their institution or good for their users. A number of other colleges have followed suit. Some, such as **Elon University** in North Carolina, even chose a different option. They decided to blend but not merge. There, the University CIO and the University Librarian cooperated to create an extremely close working relation with their respective organizations. Even so, they kept the organizations themselves separate, spawning a richly collaborative but clearly non-merged service environment.

Such examples demonstrate another side to the merger discussion — one seldom heard and little discussed. Mergers can sometimes fail our users. They can sometimes harm the quality of the institution's information service. Similarly, other organizations' paradigms may work as well or better than the typical merged scenario. In the final analysis in most service environments, quality user service depends less on the management system employed than on the caliber of service displayed by those in closest contact to the users — hands-on librarians and information professionals. This is something that most rank-and-file librarians will tell you straight out, although they don't seem to be the ones who make the conference circuit or write the articles.

When all is said and done, if a library or if an institution's IT department puts

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Drinking from the Firehose — Blogs are Making Me Feel Old!

by **Eleanor I. Cook** (Serials Coordinator & Professor, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC) <cookei@appstate.edu>



I'm beginning to think it's time to turn this column over to someone under the age of thirty since I am not sure I can convince anyone that I have anything meaningful to say about new technology. Blogs aren't new anymore and here I am, just now talking about them. How embarrassing!

When **Michael Gorman** published his now infamous piece, "Revenge of the Blog People" in the Feb. 15, 2005 issue of *Library Journal*, he inadvertently opened the doors to a torrent of derision. That's too bad, since that was not his intention, I'm sure. But considering all the new technology that has taken hold in the last few years (super-duper cell phones, various other hand-helds such as Ipods and Blackberries, Wikis, blogs, etc.) this is not surprising. My goodness, simple email is now considered passé these days!

In my attempts to understand the "blog people" **Gorman** talks about, I did find plenty of sites and read many of their comments. It's all a little boring though, which is why I know I must be growing old because none of this particularly excites me. I just get tired thinking about it!

As far as I can tell, Web logging is just another way to arrange thoughts and ideas on the Internet. Okay, that's cool. Set up a blog or set up a Website, whatever works for you. Blog software is certainly easier to learn to use. I suppose I could have a blog too. I could take my "Drinking From the Firehose" column and develop it as a blog and you could read my musings every hour or every day or however often you wanted to do so. You could even reply. Wonderful. But for who is this a good thing? I have kept a diary in my past, and I might keep one in the future, but I have never kept one publicly. When I sit down to write this column, I have already thought about the subject for months — yes, months, before I set words to screen and I actually do research on the topic beforehand. I don't think most bloggers are doing this kind of preparation most of the time, although some of them are fabulous thinkers and writers. This was a point I think **Michael Gorman** was trying to make. Opinion pieces have their place in the world but they are not necessarily serious scholarship. I have a lot of respect for good thinkers and writers, regardless of whether or not they keep a blog. There are some really useful and interesting blogs out there. But what is the long-term value in terms of scholarship? Does anyone care about that? Is this technology better suited for news feeds and the like? Many libraries are using Web logs to roll out announcements of new services, and all kinds of other organizations use them for press releases and public service announcements. That makes sense to me.

However, should an opinion column from a journal morph into a blog? That is a question I asked a colleague of mine recently and we agreed that this is an interesting question. We decided we needed to think about this some more and we might write a more in-depth paper or do a presentation on the topic. Stay tuned.

So there are lots of interesting blogs and they span the gamut in terms of topics — just like Websites do. Blogs have all the problems and pitfalls any Website might have. For example, they might be badly designed, contain factual errors, be completely out of date or just not be accessible anymore. And frankly, in some cases, the content is not interesting to anyone except the person writing the blog.

In looking at blogs about librarianship, there are dozens and dozens to choose from. Some are rather mainstream and others are definitely on the edge. It is possible in many cases to set up an RSS feed in order to get the new content delivered to your email. I have the **ALA RSS** feed coming to me, thanks to my membership in that organization. (I didn't actually ask for it, but now that I'm getting it, I actually like it.) I am thinking about doing this for a number of other publications and/or blogs, but I am still shopping around right now and talking to friends who are already reading blogs. Why should I read the thoughts of certain people? Maybe because they are kindred spirits and reading (and even responding to) their thoughts could spur me towards some creative direction I had not thought possible. It could be not only stimulating, but also inspiring. Instead of being bored, I could be renewed if I only took the time to read a few blogs.

On the other hand, I could inundate myself with yet more digital drivel. No doubt we are all being bombarded with enough information as it is. I already follow a handful of electronic lists (remember those?) and I even serve as the editor of one. The whole question of whether listserves are a dying format is in our face right now. Should e-lists migrate to blog technology? Maybe — I don't know yet, but I do know that it might be something worth examining. After all, the content of most e-lists resemble blog content in many ways. This needs to be considered.

There are a couple of places to look for blogs — **Google**, of course. But for specific types of blogs you might try **Technorati** — www.technorati.com/.

For library-related blogs, librariansindex.blogspot.com/ is useful. There are blogs for all kinds of off-beat librarian groups — bad girl, butt kicking, barbarian, body building, eclectic, flaky, hip, glamour, leather, modified, naughty and well-dressed librarians, just to name a few. Not all of these are live sites right now but they are listed and I love their names.

There are individual librarians who are well known for their blogs. Just to name a few of possible interest to **ATG** readers:

Peter Suber — known for his Open Access site: <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/fosblog.html>

Michael Stephens — **Tame the Web**: <http://tametheweb.com/>

T. Scott Plutchak — **It Gets Lonely Out Here**: <http://tscott.typepad.com/>

Krafty Librarian: <http://kraftylibrarian.blogspot.com/>

Library Juice: <http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/>

Pop Goes the Library: <http://www.popgoesthelibrary.com/>

Shifted Librarian: <http://www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/>

Blake Carver has a list of "10 Blogs to Read in 2006" if you want to look at that: <http://features.lisnews.org/features/06/02/21/1328204.shtml>.

I am probably missing some really interesting blogs here by only listing a couple of these — in fact, maybe one of my favorite colleagues has a blog and somehow I don't know it! No telling! So if I did not mention your favorite blog here, email me at <cookei@appstate.edu> and tell me what it is and why you like it and why I am an idiot for not knowing about it.

Of course, many of our professional organizations have news logs, like the **ALA** feed I get every week. A good one for academic librarians that seems to be pretty general and not at all connected with a particular publication is the **Kept-up Librarian**: <http://keptup.typepad.com/academic/>.

I must admit after poking around on the Internet looking at all these blogs, I can think of a couple of interesting uses for them. I know people blog during and after conferences, making observations and evaluating presentations they've just attended. This technology makes instant-

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user needs and service above everything else, they are on the right track. Anything less, regardless of the management structure involved, is a serious derailment. We are here to serve our users the best way that we can. It is that simple. It is only common sense to insist that more than a single service organizational structure can accomplish that. 🍄